# A Brief History of Peasant Tolstoyans

Cory Bushman

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Tolstoyans, also known as "Free Christians," were devout followers of the Russian literary genius Leo Tolstoy. They opposed the Russian Orthodox Church because of its perceived corruption and its relations with the tsarist regime. Instead of practicing Russian Orthodoxy, the Tolstoyans followed a " pure" religion through the "revelation" of Tolstoy. Tolstoy did not form an organized religion, but developed a life philosophy that would replace "the discord, deception, and violence that now rule" with "free accord, by truth, and by the brotherly love of one for another."[1]

Tolstoy's philosophy of truth and brotherly love was based on complete non-violence, vegetarianism, communal living and a code of ethics that included abstinence from alcohol, tobacco, and foul language.

The Tolstoyans went from roughly six thousand members in 1917 to less than one thousand members in 1931. In the 1940's, as the result of severe Bolshevik persecution, their numbers dropped to the point of near non-existence. The systematic annihilation of religious sects, such as the Tolstoyans, during the Bolshevik rule in Soviet Russia was a direct result of an unstable, militaristic government that was in constant fear of losing power.

In the mid 1870's Leo Nikolayevich Tolstoy found himself in a severe state of depression. With increasing thoughts of suicide, Tolstoy turned to philosophers, such as Buddha and Schopenhauer, to ease the burdens of his mind. His search for the meaning of life during this dark time, led him to a personal conversion to Christianity. Later he wrote of this experience, "I see now that if I did not kill myself it was due to some dim consciousness of the invalidity of my thoughts."[2] Repeatedly, he testified that he was saved from death by his conversion to Christianity.

Tolstoy's conversion led him to seek out what he would later proclaim to be "true" Christianity. He saw the simple faith of the Russian peasants as something to seek after. Tolstoy felt that the Russian Orthodox Church had corrupted the peasants by perverting religious truths and creating paralyzing superstitions. The Russian Orthodox Church, in turn, was not pleased with Leo Tolstoy and officially excommunicated him on February 24, 1901. The Church held to this ruling; upon Tolstoy's death in 1910, they refused to give him a church burial on the basis of his status as a heretic.

In time, Tolstoy's philosophies flourished and were put into practice by small groups of people, beginning with members of the Intelligentsia and the peasants that Tolstoy associated with. As

[1] William Gordon Spence, Tolstoy the Ascetic (Barnes &Noble, Inc.: New York, 1968) p. 118

[2] Spence, Tolstoy, pp 55.

Tolstoy's religious philosophies increased in popularity, censorship of his works by the Tsar also increased. Many of Tolstoy's works were kept in circulation due to the timely task of handwritten and hectographed copies. In 1893, Vladimir Chertkov, Tolstoy's secretary, went to England to preserve some of Tolstoy's writings only to be exiled upon his return.

One of the first known groups to answer Tolstoy's call for religious and social change was the Dukhobors. Not only did the Dukhobors refuse military service, they also destroyed their weapons and staged organized revolts. Their most famous revolt was held on Easter Day, 1895. They gave the following five philosophies as reason for the revolt:

> " 1. Opposition to the tsar, 2. Opposition to military service, 3. Opposition to private property, 4. Opposition to eating meat, and 5. Opposition to sexual relations."[3]

Three years after the Easter Day revolt, the Dukhobors were able to leave the oppressive tsarist rule and immigrate to Canada, with the monetary help of Tolstoy. The Tolstoyans, unlike the Dukhobors, were more prone to reject laws outright and did not have the luxury of escaping the consequences of their actions.

The Tolstoyans followed Tolstoy's philosophy of pacifism faithfully and were willing to sacrifice for their beliefs. When Vasya Kirin, a Tolstoyan, announced to his family that he refused to join the military, his wife replied, "You know they will kill you." He boldly stated, "Let them kill me, just so I don't kill anybody."[4]

The role of Tolstoyans as conscientious objectors not only included the refusal of military service, but also the refusal to pay military taxes and military training in schools. Even with a firm pacifist belief, the Tolstoyans believed that each person must act in accordance to their own conscience. When Savva, a Tolstoyan, was called up for military service and did not refuse, a fellow Tolstoyan wrote, "We had no binding obligation about this matter, and indeed we could not have had any; everyone acted freely, as best he could according to the state of his own soul, his own conscience."[5]

In connection with their pacifism, Tolstoyans strongly opposed capital punishment. Tolstoy referred to capital punishment's presence as "the greatest indictment against any country."[6] Capital punishment had been abolished in 1744, under the rule of Empress Elizabeth, and had not been officially restored since, although executions were still carried out. Tolstoy spoke of this contradiction with the sarcastic comment, "It must have been a 'fact' of great comfort to the five Decembrists who were hanged in 1825."[7]

During the Revolution of 1917, one of the Bolshevik's most popular rally cries was "Down with capital punishment and every kind of violence!" These slogans were quickly forgotten and pacifists found themselves petitioning the Council of People's Commissars just two years after the revolution for the abolition of the death penalty because it had been reintroduced by the Bol-

[3] Josh Sanborn, "Pacifist politics and peasant politics: Tolstoy and the Duukhobors, 1895-1999", Canadian Ethnic Studies 27 (1995), pp. 8.

[4] William Edgerton, Memoirs of Peasant Tolstoyans In Soviet Russia (Indiana University Press: Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1993), p. 107.

[5] Edgerton, Memoirs, pp. 106.

[6] Peter Glassgold, An Anthology of Emma Goldman's Mother Earth (Counterpoint: Washington, D.C., 2001), p. 372.

[7] A.N. Wilson, Tolstoy (W.W. Norton &Company: New York &London, 1988), p. 111.

shevik's in 1919. Yakov Dementyevich Dragunovsky, a Tolstoyan, said of the Bolshevik promises, "There's no trace of those fine slogans anymore—they are drenched in blood."[8]

Tolstoy sincerely believed that refusing military service would result in inner freedom. Tolstoy taught that the solider is "a professional man-killer." He said that a soldier does not kill "for the love of it, like a savage, or in a passion, like homicide. He is cold-blooded, mechanical, obedient tool of his military superiors."[9] In line with this, Tolstoyans believed that their only true weapon was "to turn to God, for it is he alone who dispenses supreme justice."[10] Dragunovsky, like many others, converted to Tolstoyism due to the horrors that he saw and experienced in the military. Some people, like Sergey, deserted the army by going to the regimental headquarters and laying down their weapons.

Tolstoyans, seen as a probable threat to the Soviet regime, were called by many different names, including "enemies of the people," "kulaks," and, interestingly, anarchists. Many people, then and now, equate anarchy to complete disorder, but according to Jaques Ellul, an expert on Christian anarchism, anarchy is actually the absolute rejection of violence.[11] It is not clear if the Tolstoyans ever claimed the title of anarchists for themselves. In Boris Mazurin's memoirs, he notes the difference between Tolstoyans and anarchists: "What is the difference between anarchists and Tolstoyans?" and one anarchist answered: "The difference is that the Tolstoyans are more consistent than we are."[12]

Whether or not Tolstoyans are "true" anarchists, they have definite anarchist views toward government and force. Tolstoy boldly stated, "A government which relies on iron and explosives, which executes a murderer who is so because of insanity or of poverty, and which glorifies the butchery of innocent thousands, is the greatest instrument for wrong, the worst of oppressors."[13] In this assertion, Tolstoy described the Soviet regime. One Tolstoyan asked, "Do the Communists really know their imagined 'enemies,' the 'counterrevolutionary Tolstoyans,' who reject violence as contradicting reason, and recognize only the reasonable and beautiful as the basis for the new structure of the classless society, the new structure of communism?"[14] On numerous occasions the Tolstoyans were told something along the lines of, "It's all well and good, what you Tolstoyans say. That will all come about—a stateless society without violence and without frontiers, sober and industrious, and without private property. But this is not the right time for it—right now it is even harmful."[15]

True to Tolstoy's teachings, the Tolstoyans believed in communal ownership of property, a belief that would later lead to their destruction under Stalin's collectivization movement. In Confession Tolstoy wrote, "One cannot expect to understand the truth about life unless one works and recognizes that men cannot live if they do not co-operate."[16] One commune member wrote about the commune as, "a social unity so powerful and real a nature that whatever is being done now by the States to paralyze and destroy such unity is no avail. That unity resists everything

[8] Edgerton, Memoirs, pp. 203.

[9] Emma Goldman, Red Emma Speaks (Humanity Books: New York, 1998), p. 52.

[10] Jacues Ellul, Anarchy and Christianity (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company: Grand Rapids, Colorado, 1991), p. 83.

[11] Ellul, Anarchy, pp. 11.

[12] Edgerton, Memoirs, pp. 38.

[13] Glassgold, Anthology, pp. 371.

[14] Edgerton, Memoirs, pp. 242.

[15] Edgerton, Memoirs, pp. 97.

[16] Spence, Tolstoy, pp. 58.

and it will survive the States."[17] Despite the strength and social unity of the Tolstoyans, they would suffer much before they would be able to earn the title of survivors.

With increasing momentum for social and governmental change, a revolution took place in Russia in 1917. The Tolstoyans also desired change. They were not pleased with the oppressive rule of the tsarist government, having lived under tsarist rule as Tolstoyans since their earliest communes established in 1901. The Bolshevik slogan "Bread, Land and Peace" was welcomed by many, who ultimately put them into power. In October, 1917, a Tolstoyan by the name of Ivan Koloskov visited Lenin personally in Smolny. Koloskov apologized to Lenin, on behalf of his Tolstoyan brothers for morally not being able to serve militarily. Lenin simply replied, "What is there to forgive that is your conviction. Everyone is entitled to his convictions. You will be doing other indispensable things."[18]

In October of 1918, the United Council of Religious Communities and Groups was established, with Tolstoy's former secretary Chertkov at its head. Chertkov's leadership, along with such people as Krupskaya, who was Lenin's wife, played an important role in seeking religious justice and freedom for Tolstoyans and other religious sects. However, while it has been said that the United Council confirmed "the existence in Russia of one of the most advanced and tolerant ways of treating conscientious objectors,"[19] in reality, the authorities were treating them more unjustly and cruelly than in most other countries. On October 22, 1918, Trotsky introduced Order No. 130, which "permitted conscientious objectors to serve in a noncombatant capacity as medical orderlies." However, despite this "accommodation," a large number of Tolstoyans refused to perform any type of alternative military service.

On January 4, 1919, in the midst of the Civil War, Chertkov and the United Council were recipients of a decree signed by Lenin, which granted "complete exemption from military service to any man who could demonstrate sincere objection on the basis of his religious convictions." Despite the legitimacy of the decree, many local military officials ignored it. Close to one hundred objectors were shot during 1919-1920. In one instance, a group of eight men who refused military service were sentenced to death. With the aid of Chertkov and the United Council, a telegram was sent to cancel the execution. However, the telegram was postponed—purposefully, some believe—and all eight of the men were executed on Christmas Eve, 1919. Although these inhumane cases are troubling, the United Council was able to give aid to nearly 8,000 people from 1919-1920, exempting them from having to serve in the military.

Upon the introduction of conscription laws in 1920, the decree of 1919 was made null and void. This complicated the position of Chertkov as the chairman of the United Council since there had been over 30,000 applications for conscientious objector status by 1921. Notably, it was during the years of 1920-1921 that the Tolstoyan movement experienced its most vigorous growth.

This growth was evidence of people's desire to discover truths, as well as their strength and determination to adhere to those findings. Yahov Dementyevich Dragunovsky is an example of this type of determination. Despite the known repercussions, Dragunovsky continued to talk and write about the useless violence of the Soviet government. He was tried and shot for his desire to share his beliefs.

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[17] G.P. Maximoff, The Political Philosophy of Bakunin (The Free Press: New York, 1964), p. 273.

[18] Alexei Zverev &Bruno Coppieters "V.D. Bonch-Bruevich and the Duukhobors: On the conscientious objection policies of the Bolsheviks", Canadian Ethnic Studies 27 (1995), pp. 7.

[19] Zverev &Coppieters, V.D. Bonch, pp. 9.

On October 5, 1921 the People's Commissariat of Agriculture issued a proclamation that promised "complete freedom of belief and unbelief." Ironically, on December 28, 1921, just two months after the proclamation, ten Tolstoyans were executed for their religious beliefs. In that same year, the United Council was put on trail for crimes against the state, and the following year the United Council, which had acted as a safeguard for thousands, was disbanded. Just as Dimitry Morgachev, a Tolstoyan stated, "Only a few rare birds are under the protection of law."

Along with Lenin's death in 1924, also came the passing of the recognition of Tolstoyans as a legitimate religious group. Despite the many deaths and injustices Tolstoyans suffered under Lenin's leadership, the Tolstoyans were still unprepared for the increased suffering and persecution that they would experience under Stalin's rule. The War Resisters' publication for the month of August read, "At the present critical moment, when every war resister may be faced with the necessity of passing form words to deeds, and, perhaps, of sealing with his own suffering his service to the universal brotherhood and peace among all nations…"[20] The Tolstoyans, whether they were aware of it or not at the time, would be required to suffer in order to adhere to their fundamental beliefs.

One of the great achievements of the Tolstoyans was the establishment of the Moscow Vegetarian Society, whose soul purpose was "the establishment of love and peace among all living creatures." The Moscow Vegetarian Society was responsible for a monthly publication, the organization of special events, a feeding center, a Children's Home, and guiding people toward vegetarianism, which was considered "the first stop in the infinite road to perfection."[21] In 1928, the Society was denied the right to renew its lease and, in 1929, the Moscow Vegetarian Society in Memory of Leo Tolstoy was officially closed by the government. With the closing of the society, all open activity for Tolstoyans also ended.

A full-fledged anti-religious campaign took hold in 1929, the same year that Stalin coined "Year of the Great Break." Sundays were abolished, Red Weddings took the place of church weddings and there was even a suggestion to remove the word "God" from the dictionary. However, "God" was not removed so that it could continue to be used in anti-religious propaganda. Stalin said that the party could not be "neutral as regards religion" because "the party rests upon science."[22] Stalin did not remain neutral, and it could be argued that he never was neutral, in regard to religious sects. Fearing Stalin's attitude, Chertkov obtained permission for Tolstoyan communes to resettle in Siberia in order to escape persecution. In 1931, with only 1,000 Tolstoyans left, Our Life and Labor Commune was established in Siberia.

In 1934, Stalin began a rigorous collectivization campaign. His goal was to switch all agricultural communes over to agricultural cooperatives. The Tolstoyans refused. Boris Mazurin recalls a time when he was told: "Comrade Stalin has said that at the present time only fools or religious ascetics can live in communes." To this, Mazurin replied, "So be it—we'll be fools, we'll be religious ascetics, but we want to go on living as a commune, and in Comrade Stalin's words there is no direct indication that communes are forbidden."[23] Comrade Stalin may have said that "all citizens enjoy freedom to practice their religion," but he also said that all citizens have the

[20] Peter Brock, Testimonies of Conscience Sent From the Soviet Union to the War Resisters' International 1923-1929 (Printed Privately: Toronto, 1997), p. 29.

[21] Spence, Tolstoy, pp. 115.

[22] Wladslaw Kania, Bolshevism and Religion (Polish Library: New York 1946), p. 16.

[23] Spence, Tolstoy, pp. 92.

"freedom to conduct antireligious propaganda."[24] The latter seemed to win out; in 1936, all of the leaders of the commune were arrested and by 1938—a time referred to as the "devil's orgy"—the commune was completely destroyed.

In 1936, the government made an official statement that "there were not longer [conscientious objectors] in the union that therefore no need for further legal provision for C.O.s."[25] This statement was especially ironic considering that, also in 1936, all of the leaders of Our Life and Labor Commune were arrested on the basis of conscientious objection and refusal to collectivize. Between 1936 and 1940, sixty-five members of commune were arrested. Further arrests continued in the following years. Many of those arrested never returned; those who did had experienced horrific treatment in prisons and work camps. In one winter at the Ust-Vymsk camp, 500 of the 1,200 prisoners died. Boris Mazurin wrote of his fellow Tolstoyans who were recipients of the Soviet horror: "There were dozens of faithful members devoted to it—commune members without a commune, scattered about in the labor camps and prisons of Siberia, who had brought its bleak, uninhabited expanses under cultivation, only to fertilize it with their bones."[26]

Just one year after Stalin's death in 1953, Khrushchev organized a commission to rehabilitate those who had been wrongly charged under Stalin's oppressive rule. It was not until the late 1970s that individual Tolstoyans were granted rehabilitation, and even then they were told not to share their experiences. In 1988, an article called "The Return of Tolstoy the Thinker" was published in Voprosy Literatury, marking what could be referred to as the survival of the Tolstoyan spirit. The Soviet government's view that the Tolstoyans were counterrevolutionaries hindering the building of socialism was evident in its hypocritical policies and neglect toward the people that it forcibly governed. Systematically, the Soviet regime rid themselves of all opponents they felt were capable of gaining power. Foolishly, they used unnecessary force and resources to prevent a group of people from gaining power, when this group never desired to gain power. A Tolstoyan poem asks, "What were the Tolstoyans guilty of before the free country? Why were they denied their right to live in a commune of labor?" The poem answers, "Perhaps they were guilty on of this before the free country: that they strove to follow their conscience, as Leo Tolstoy teaches."[27] Just as the poem gives no solid reason as to why the Tolstoyans were not granted their right to live in peace, history, too, leaves the question unanswered. In his memoirs, Dimitry Morgachev gives a reason for the destruction of the Tolstoyans, which alludes to sheer ignorance. "Not a single one of those communes remains today, and all because someone who did not work in the communes and took no part in their life, but thought he had the right to lord over people and make them live his way, took it into his head to close the communes with one stroke of his pen."[28]

Throughout Tolstoyan memoirs there is this idea of being remembered, not merely as individuals, but as a group of people who were followers of Christ and their spiritual guide, Leo Tolstoy. They were a people dedicated to love and to their convictions. Most importantly, they were willing to give up their lives for those convictions. A Tolstoyan survivor named Mikhail Gorbunov-Pasadov wrote that, "every effort must be made to resurrect it [Tolstoyan memory] from the darkness of that compulsory silence."[29] Leo Tolstoy did not live to witness the devel-

[24] Kania, Bolshevism, pp. 11.
[25] Brock, Testimonies, pp. 37.
[26] Edgerton, Memoirs, pp. 104.
[27] Edgerton, Memoirs, pp. 177.
[28] Edgerton, Memoirs, pp. 174.
[29] Edgerton, Memoirs, pp. 2.

opment and dedication of the Tolstoyan people. Surely he would have felt a similar sense of brotherhood toward the Tolstoyans as he did the Dukhobors. William Spence shows Tolstoy's personal empathy toward his philosophies and his devotion to the people that followed them when he wrote, "The executioners continued their work, as if they had not heard Tolstoy's request, 'Hang me too.'"[30]

[30] Spence, Tolstoy, pp. 114.

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